

Ask A Biologist

by Doug Updike

Question:

Why have bear numbers continued to increase over the past 20 years?

Answer:

We have seen the estimated statewide population of black bears increase three-fold since the early 1980s. The current estimate of 33,000 adult bears is the highest recorded population size in recent history. There are three main reasons for this increase:

First, illegal killing of bears is less today than it was in the early 1980s. There were significant changes to laws and regulations in 1985, which made penalties for bear poaching very stiff. These changes are still a major deterrent to bear poaching in California.

Second, bear populations continue to expand into areas that were historically occupied by the California grizzly bear. Since the grizzly bear was extirpated in the early 1920s, black bears have expanded into the central coastal

mountains, south through the San Jacinto Mountain Range, and into the Cleveland National Forest. This slow, steady range expansion is the natural dispersal of bears into new suitable habitat. We continue to receive reports of black bears in various locations where they have never been seen before. This includes southern Marin County, San Mateo County and San Diego County.

Third, bears are omnivorous, capable of using a wide variety of foods. They are mostly vegetarians, but will take advantage of insects like termites and bees. Insect larvae and boring insects in logs are also important to bears. They will also catch and eat prey, if the opportunity presents itself. As berries and other fruits and mast become ripe, bears will switch to them. Bears have adapted a strategy of eating whatever is available, and it pays off.

The steady increase in bear populations has resulted in increased hunting opportunity for bear hunters. In 1990, there was a limit on the number of bear tags



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sold, and the season would close as soon as 1,250 bears were reported killed. Today, there is no limit on the number of bear tags sold, and the season will close as soon as 1,700 bears are reported killed. (During the past two years, the season has run its full length before reaching the 1,700 mark.) This year, the bear hunting zone has been expanded into the east side of the Sierra Nevada. (See page 8 for details.)

Which is the White-tailed Deer?



Top: Rocky Mountain mule deer.

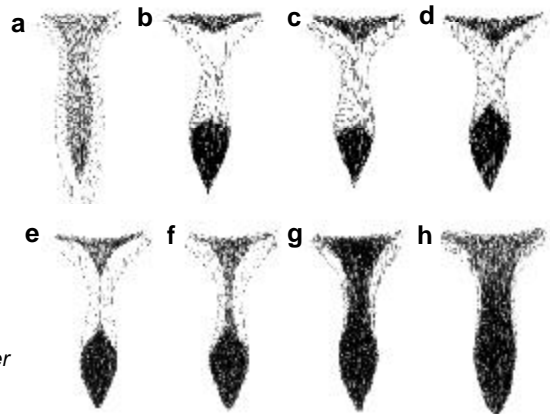


Right: White-tailed deer.

Contrary to persistent rumors, there are no white-tailed deer in California. "White-tailed" refers to the deer species *Odocoileus virginianus*, which is prevalent throughout North America but absent from the Golden State. California is home to *Odocoileus hemionus*—better known as "mule deer." There are six subspecies of mule deer in California; interestingly, most of them have whiter tails than the white-tailed deer.

(Hint: It's not the one with the whitest tail.)

Typical Tail Patterns of Deer



- a) white-tailed deer
- b) Rocky Mountain mule deer
- c) burro mule deer
- d) Inyo mule deer
- e) California mule deer
- f) alternate California mule deer
- g) southern mule deer
- h) Columbian black-tailed deer